

Ancient Battles

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In 1575 Palladio published an illustrated Italian edition of Julius Caesar's *Commentaries*. Five years later, his death halted the publication of Polybius' *Histories*, which included forty-three engravings showing armies deployed at various battles: from Cannae to Zamas, Mantinea and Cynoscephalae. At the height of his career, Palladio invested time, energy and money into two publishing ventures far removed from architecture. In fact the two publications were part of a world of military matters which had attracted Palladio's interest since his youth, when it formed an integral part of his education undertaken by Giangiorgio Trissino.



Fig 1: Valerio Chiericati, manuscript of *Della Milizia*. Venice, Museo Correr, MS 883

As John Hale has shown, sixteenth-century Venice was one of the most active centres in Europe for military publications dealing with matters such as fortifications, tactics, artillery, fencing and even medicine. The distinguishing element in the Venetian production of such books was the widespread belief in the importance of the example of the Classical Greek and Roman writers, shared by men of letters and professional soldiers. This was combined with particular care shown towards the reader. The books were supplemented with tables of contents, indices, marginal notes and even accompanied by the publication of compendia illustrating the texts, such as the series entitled *Gioie* ('Gems') which Gabriele Giolito published from 1557 to 1570 (Hale 1980, pp. 257-268). Many of the leading players in this milieu were linked to Trissino, albeit

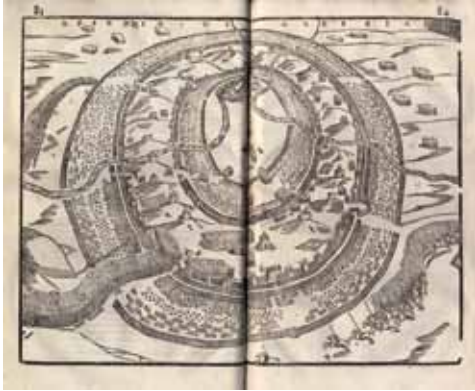


Fig 2: Mario Savorgnan, 'Siege of Alesia', in *Della milizia terrestre e marittima* (Venice 1599, pp. 83-84)

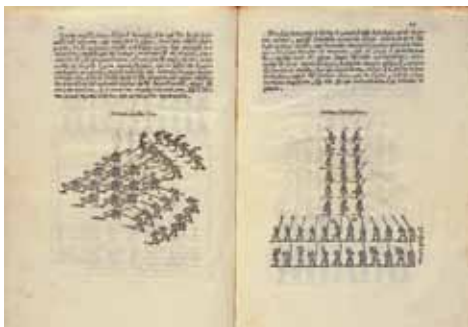


Fig 3: Francesco Robortello, critical illustrated edition of Aelian Tacticus (Venice 1552, pp. 52-53)

in different ways: cultivated soldiers like Giovan Jacopo Leonardi, the Vicentine Valerio Chiericati (fig. 1) or the Friulian Mario Savorgnan (fig. 2), and men of letters such as Francesco Robortello (fig. 3) or Francesco Patrizi. In Venice, in addition to the flourishing business of books on military matters, there was a lively production of popular prints, often reproducing contemporary battles, made almost immediately after the events.

Palladio's two contributions must be seen in this particularly fertile context. When he drafted them, however, there had been few precedents for their particular communicational strategy and impact. The texts of Caesar and Polybius were systematically illustrated through some forty plates, with special care being taken over the relation between text and image, thanks to a well-planned system of cross-reference. The abundant use of illustrations was a new development when compared, for example, to Fra Giovanni Giocondo's edition of Caesar's text printed by Aldo Manuzio in 1513, which only had seven. As regards the content of the engravings, Palladio was not interested in the clashes between the armies or the commanders' feats: Caesar, Hannibal or Philip of Macedonia never appear, unlike Darius and Alexander in the *Battle of Issus*

painted by Albrecht Altdorfer in Munich (1529) or Floris's drawings of Charles V's Tunis campaign. Palladio's battles without heroes focus on the geographical features of the site, and the composition and deployment of the armies in the field. In short, they showed 'the architecture of battles'.

In pursuing this aim, Palladio did not follow the method of representing armies in the field with conventional diagrams typical of the first half of the century and derived from the text of Aelian (Aelianus Tacticus), adopted by Machiavelli in *L'Arte della Guerra* ('The Art of War', Florence 1521; fig. 4) or by Battista della Valle. This convention continued up to the period of Palladio's enterprise in books like *Il soldato* ('The Soldier') by Domenico Mora (Venice 1569) (fig. 5) in which the battle of Pharsalus, between Caesar and Pompey, is schematised in a series of letters. Palladio, on the other hand, chose to represent the battles set in the landscape, in a realistic fashion, with bird's eye views, as Dürer had done in the engraving showing *The Siege of a City* (1527) (fig. 7) and as popular prints also did. Palladio may have known of many contemporary Veneto publishing ventures on the subject: for example, *Della milizia terrestre e marittima* ('Of Armies and Navies'; fig. 11) by

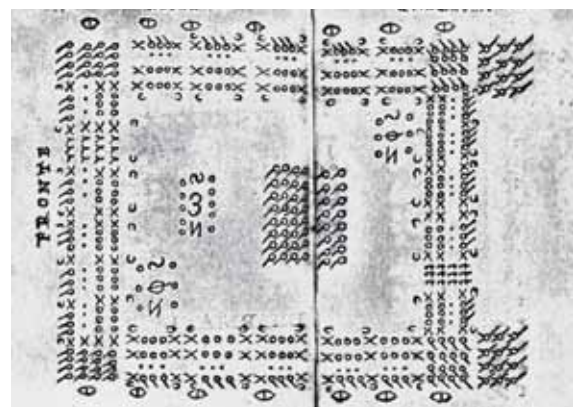


Fig 4: Niccolò Machiavelli, 5th figure from *L'Arte della Guerra* (Florence 1521)

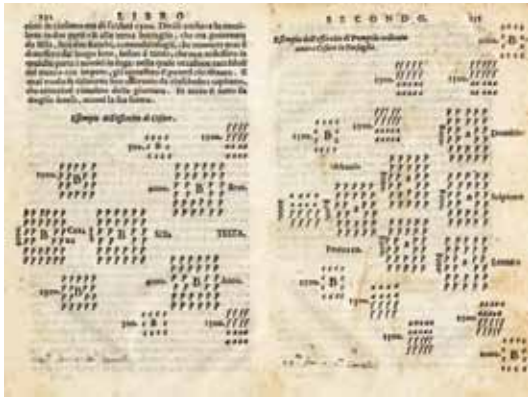


Fig 5: Domenico Mora, 'Battle of Pharsalus between Caesar and Pompey', in *Il Soldato* (Venice 1569)



Fig 6: Giovanni Franco, 'Formation of the Roman legion. After Polybius', engraving reproduced in *Gl'ordini della militia romana. Trattati da Polibio in figure di rame* (Venice 1573)



Fig 7: Albrecht Dürer, *Siege of a City* (1527)

Trissino's friend Mario Savorgnan (1513-1572), published posthumously in 1599, but already in circulation in the 1560s, as demonstrated by the extract sent by the author to Alvisé Cornaro in 1562 (Lippi 1983, pp. 170-171), or *Gl'ordini della militia romana. Trattati da Polibio in figure di rame* ('The Orders of the Roman Militia. After Polybius in engraved copper plates'; fig. 6) which Giovanni Franco published in Venice in 1573. This was a ten-page leaflet, including eight with illustrations, announcing the forthcoming publication of an edition of Polybius, systematically illustrated by Franco's uncle Francesco Patrizi; the work only actually saw the light of day in 1583 (Marciani 1970-



Fig 8: Leonhart Fronsperger, *Siege of a City*, in *Von Kayserlichem Kriegsrecht* (Frankfurt 1566)

1971a, pp. 306-308). Compared to these books, Palladio's description of the landscape is more accurate and realistic (his antiquarian geography owes much to the cartographic knowledge of Cristoforo Sorte), and is also conveyed in words thanks to alphabetical letters added to the images which referred to a legend on the back of the plate. This method, also used in the *Quattro Libri*, and the kind of bird's eye view employed link his *Commentaries* to a splendid military book from the German-speaking world: *Von Kayserlichem Kriegsrecht* ('Of Caesar's Rules of War'; fig. 8) by Leonhart Fronsperger, published in Frankfurt in 1566 (Hale 1977, p. 248).



Fig 9: Battista Zelotti and workshop, *Battle between two armies*, fresco removed from Villa da Porto, Torri di Quartesolo. Vicenza, Palazzo Trissino

Palladio may have known this work through Ippolito Porto, who referred to it when he commissioned Battista Zelotti to make frescoes of his own military deeds in the Villa di Torri at Quartesolo, Vicenza (fig. 9) before 1572. Given the affinities between the villa frescoes and the plates in the *Commentaries*, Zelotti, a Veronese painter and a close collaborator of Palladio, is a good candidate for the artist who translated Palladio's ideas into drawing, although there can be no doubt about intellectual property of the venture. In fact, Palladio planned the images, chose the subject to be illustrated, its mode of representation and probably even made the first sketches.

The search for figurative sources should not, however, obscure a substantial new development: the decision to illustrate the text with sequential views, rather like 'stills' in a film. Of course, accompanying a text with images was a familiar method for an architect used to tackling the exegesis of Vitruvius. In the *Quattro Libri*, Palladio had already dealt with the bridge over the Rhine made by Caesar, quoting the passage in Latin and offering his own translation, accompanied by an illustration with an explanatory legend (Beltramini, Gros 2002, pp. 185-186). But this was a method of visualising technical details, whereas the model of the 'film stills' for the *Commentaries* and *Histories* must be sought in the books of Giangiorgio Trissino. Palladio explicitly states his debt to his mentor in having initiated him in studies of ancient military affairs (Palladio 1570, *Proemio*). On reading the pages dedicated to battles in *La Italia liberata da Gotthi* ('Italy Freed from the Goths'; Rome-Venice 1547-1548), however, we realise that Trissino dramatises the texts on ancient tactics. In the passage in Book XII, when the Goth infantry is arrayed to form an acute angle in the shape of a 'falange antistoma duplare' ('twofold antistoma phalanx'), in order to trap the enemy cavalry, deployed in a rhombus, Trissino literally sets on the stage the formations described (and schematised in a diagram) in Aelian's text (Beltramini 2008, p. 221).

We must also go back to Giangiorgio Trissino to understand Palladio's interest in these subjects, which primarily came from the Vicentine Humanist's cultural legacy, in which drama, architecture and ancient military affairs were combined in an integrated vision of Classicism (Burns 2002, p. 378). It is no accident that Palladio's drawings for studies of military formations date from his early years and the only illustration included in *La Italia liberata da Gotthi* was probably his: it shows Belisarius' camp, clearly derived from Polybius's text, on which Machiavelli had already based one of the figures included in *L'Arte della guerra* (1521). Although Palladio never mentions Machiavelli, his debt to the Florentine Humanist should not be underestimated. Palladio obviously not only shared with Machiavelli the interest in studying ancient writers as a model for contemporary military affairs, but also a belief in the importance of method and discipline rather than new weapons introduced to the field. As the illustrations chosen for Palladio's two editions reveal, both men also believed in the crucial role of battles in resolving conflicts (Gilbert 1944, pp. 17-18). Moreover, just as Machiavelli turns to the experience

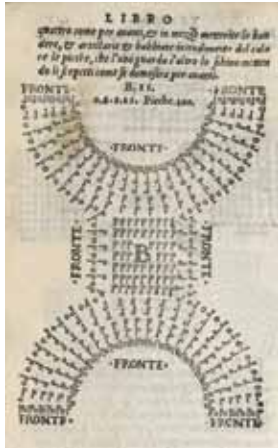


Fig 10: Battista della Valle, 'Battalion of 300 pikes and two lunettes', in *Vallo* (Venice 1539)



Fig 11: Andrea Palladio, 'Villa Mocenigo alla Brenta', woodcut reproduced in *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura* (Venice 1570, II, p. 78)

of the ancients to shape the battalions of Florentine peasants, so too Palladio seems to be inspired by a practical aim, which must be seen against the background of the Venetian Republic's considerations about strengthening its own territorial militia. Although in the second half of the sixteenth century (and not only in the Veneto) there was a process of specialisation as regards fortifications, in which soldiers and engineers tended to exclude architects, Palladio's only occasional interest in this field is surprising (Puppi 1988, pp. 177-178). The overt explanation is given in the foreword to the *Commentaries*, where he asserts that the best defence does not lie in walls and bastions, but in the effective organisation of armies. Just as ancient buildings were the source

for constructing buildings of 'our time', so too an effective army could be built on the basis of the lessons of Caesar, Hannibal or Scipio. Palladio did not only make available the material for this project to readers. He even organised a practical demonstration (date unknown, but before 1575), guiding 500 oarsmen of galleys and scout vessels as they impeccably engaged in the manoeuvres described by Aelian, in the presence of Francesco Patrizi and the Venetian military leaders, including Valerio Chiericati (Hale 1977, pp. 243-244). Chiericati was the prototype of the Humanist soldier and the author of a treatise (which remained in manuscript) on ancient armies, successfully used to organise the *cernide* (territorial militia) of Friulian peasants. Palladio had words of praise and admiration for Chiericati both in the *Commentaries* and the *Histories* (Puppi 1980b, pp. 693-696). This was not enough to protect him, however, from an invective by Chiericati's cousin, Filippo Pigafetta, who in the dedicatory letter of his own translation from the Greek of another treatise on tactics, *Leone Imperatore* ('Emperor Leo [vi of Byzantine]'), writes: 'they, after having seen it [Chiericati's manuscript], also began to draw and print plates of deployments and military affairs upon the *Commentaries* of Caesar and the *Histories* of Polybius, spoiling their meaning and obscuring clear matters (Leone Imperatore 1586, 'Lettera dedicatoria a Gian Luigi e Marcantonio Corner')'.

Lastly, a link between Palladio's military studies and his architecture is not only established in terms of ideas through Vitruvius, an engineer in Caesar's army, but also by observing how the arrangement of military formations could be reflected in the composition of the various parts of villa complexes. This is the case, for example, with the curved deployment of armies in the Worcester College drawing (Burns 2002, p. 378, note 35), also found in the probable source for Palladio's schemes, Battista della Valle's treatise entitled *Vallo* (fig. 10): in this work the battalion of '300 pikes and two lunettes' foreshadows the unusual form of the villa designed for Leonardo Mocenigo 'for his site on the Brenta' (fig. 11) (Palladio 1570, II, p. 66).

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